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The Novel Delhi: A critical study

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Abstract

Delhi is a very significant novel by Khushwant Singh. It is a remarkable work of art which reveals the writer's great intellectual powers. After reading the novel the first and foremost question arises: what kind of novel is Delhi? For it can be read as an authentic documentary on the city of Delhi.

Keywords: Novel, documentary, Delhi

Introduction

It can even be viewed as a delectable travesty of history. It can also be enjoyed as a knowledgeable guidebook in the shape of a novel. It is definitely not a conventional novel of character and situation. Delhi can be perceived as a socio-historical novel but with a difference. This literary work of Khushwant Singh has undoubtedly posed a challenge for its critical analysis. It is most difficult to describe or define its form because it can be called a documentary novel; also a historical saga; or a colourful historical pageant put in the form of a traditional novel. It can also be viewed as synthesis of different forms which make the modern fiction. Here we have to be liberal in our interpretation because of all the literary forms, the novel is more flexible and fluid and certainly in the case of the modern novel, the usual elements of the novel-plot, character and technique - have begun to acquire a different kind of connotation. Most of the modern novelists seem to be relying on memory, vision and even fantasy. The novel of ideas has certainly replaced the novel of plot and character or what is generally known as a well-made novel where the points like a well-marked beginning, a middle and a compelling and inevitable end are easily discernible. As Anthony Burgess, a successful critic and a modern novelist has observed: The term novel has in fact, come to mean any imaginative prose composition long enough to be stitched rather than stapled.

Thus, Khushwant Singh's Delhi which took more than twenty-five years to complete has become any writer's envy. A highly readable book, from the beginning to the end, the novel sometimes seems to be a treatise on Sufism sometimes an album of sex-exploits. Sometimes it appears to be re-hashing of the mediaeval and contemporary history of Delhi. At times the novel seems to be a plea for the resurrection of Delhi's secular character in the present politics. But, Mr. Singh, himself assures us that it is not a work of propaganda. From the author's own remarks as published in The Hindustan Times, Sunday edition. January 14, 1990, on page 2, we have come to know that he meant it to be a novel and not a work of propaganda. He also asserts that he is never conscious of the purpose behind his writings in a utilitarian sense, and that once you are conscious of a purpose of writing then you are only becoming a propagandist. What Khushwant Singh says gives us mental relief and induces us to accept Delhi as a novel, a work of art and nothing else.

Delhi, in fact, is a stupendous saga of the development of a place called Delhi. It is an attempt to record the evolution of a historical city through the ebb and flow of time. Basically, we can say, it is the story of its growing up. And to show this, he has chosen a gigantic canvas, where on this enormous canvas he crystallizes the historical action that went into the making of the great city. In the first novel Train to Pakistan, the action accounts for a few days, in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale duration is of one year, that is, April 1942 to April 1943, but in Delhi the writer has tried to span several centuries from the earliest times to the present age that accounted for in the development of Delhi.

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As he puts it in the foreword to the novel:

It took me twenty-five years to piece together this story spanning several centuries of history. I put in it all I had in me as a writer: love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta and violence and above all tears. I did not write this novel with any audience in mind. All I wanted to do was tell my readers what I learnt about the city roaming among its ancient ruins, its congested bazaars, its diplomatic corps and its cocktail parties.

And further he reveals his feelings that my only aim was to get them to know Delhi and love it as much as I do.

The above quoted passage indicates that the novel is full of love, lust, hate, violence and sex. The novel opens with the following lines: I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati, when I had my fill of whoring in foreign lands. We are told that Delhi and Bhagmati are synonymous and the author is deeply attached to both of them. Bhagmati is the central figure who is a female eunuch or harlot. He tells us that Bhagmati and Delhi have a lot in common. Having been long misused by rough people, they have learnt to conceal their seductive charms under a mask of repulsive ugliness. It is only to their lovers among whom I count myself that they reveal their true selves. Khushwant Singh admits that the theme of the novel is to... explain the strange paradox of my lifelong, love-hate affair with the city and the woman. Bhagmati and Delhi, both are ugly and repulsive still the author gives vent to his feelings and reveals, that although I detest living in Delhi and am ashamed of my liaison with Bhagmati, I cannot keep away from either for too long. As the story unfolds, we get the story of Delhi from different narrators who are also eye-witnesses to the rise and fall of Delhi from pre-historic times to its subsequent rise to eminence after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The novel is told in first-person narrative and the author remains the central narrator. Bhagmati and Budh Singh, who are introduced in the very first chapter, remain with the author till the end and remain eye-witnesses to various incidents which have taken place in Delhi since independence. The novel begins in contemporary setting and the author's sudden appearance after a brief sojourn abroad marks a good beginning for the novel. In the very beginning the author refers to his occupation as a Journalist attached to The Hindustan Times and his funny experiences in the country of his birth. He also comments on the behavior of the custom officers and also exposes the method of working at these customs offices and the bureaucracy. Passing through the roads of Delhi, he shows us the scene that is catching up in Delhi: "More roads and roundabouts have had their names changed. The Windsors, Yorks, Cannings and Hardings have been replaced by the Tilaks, Patels, Azads and Nehrus. There are red flags outside a petrol station with three men chanting "Death to Petrolstationwala". Red flags outside Dr. Sen's Nursing Home. Six men yelling, "Death to Doctors". Red flag outside Food and Agriculture Ministry building. Four men in garlands sit cross-legged on the lawn. A placard in front of them says: "Third Day of Relay Hunger Strike". A procession with saffron flags goes along Parliament Street chanting: Our religion and our country are one. The cow is our mother. Death to cow eaters.

The above quoted passage presents the status of Delhi, and in broader perspective the whole of India. It is the India after independence. The author tells us that as he moves further he sees more red flags, more banners with more demands.

He reads the scandals of underworld; discusses with his friends on sex, corruption and inefficiency and the starving people of Bihar. He reflects at the coffee-house talk and with a pinch of satire writes: What's happened to the Delhiwallas? They are not even dying as they used to! Only one pyre burning and three heaps of smouldering ashes. No mourners But, the satirist switches over to the pathetic condition of Delhi and like a philosopher says – That's Delhi. When life gets too much for you, all you need to do is to spend an hour a Nigambodh Ghat, watch the dead being put to the flames and hear the kin wail for them. Then come home and down a couple of pegs of whisky. In Delhi, death and drink make life worth living! From the serious tone he quickly changes over to lighter vein, explaining his engagement with one Lady JHT, with whom he once again observes Delhi's past. He unfolds the history of 'Tilpat', one of Pandav's five villages given to them by Kauravas. After a brief sojourn with this lady, the author returns to his place where Bhagmati awaits his arrival.

Bhagmati, according to Khushwant Singh, symbolizes Delhi. Thus, the writer gives a detailed description of Bhagmati. She is a hijda or eunuch. The reader gets her full description in the following words: "Her left hand is clenched into a fist with a cigarette sticking out of her fingers. She sucks noisily at the cigarette and flicks the ash on my carpet. Her hair is heavily oiled and arranged in serried waves fixed by celluloid clips shaped like butterflies. Bhagmati is the worst dressed whore in Delhi.

Not only her complexion is black and has small-pox marks on her face, her teeth are stained with betel-leaf. The writer says- Bhagmati is the plainest-looking whore in Delhi. Further he admits that Bhagmati is the coarsest whore in Delhi. The writer uses all these epithets to explain that she is ugly and repulsive. And Delhi the city too is a gangrenous accretion of noisy bazaars and mean looking hovels into the narrow, winding lanes, the stench of raw sewage may bring vomit. About people of Delhi he says that they spit phlegm, are loud-mouthed and express familiarity with incestuous abuse. Both are unattractive, still the writer has interest in them. He admits that behind this repulsive background there is a past history and the rest he has discovered himself. The author explains his obsession with Bhagmati and Delhi too in the following words-As I have said before. I have two passions in my life; my city Delhi and Bhagmati. They have two things in common; they are lots of fun. And they are sterile. In a very dramatic way Bhagmati was introduced to the author in course of a drive in the city. He found her on the road in a most desperate condition with her hands and legs stretched out as if crucified. The author narrates his experiences with this strange creature he had met by chance and who remained in his life permanently thereafter. And from here onwards began his love-hate episode. Several times he tried to get rid of her, but in vain. Whenever he thought of losing touch with her, she somehow made her appearance in most unexpected manner and at most unusual times. While having a joy-ride to Mehrauli with Bhagmati in the monsoon rain he came across a piece of stone engraved with few words in Persian, which lures the author from the present to the past.

The discussion on the year 1947 develops the story of this doomed city further where we read how people faced the partition and its aftermath. One Ram Rakha, resident of Hadali in Pakistan, narrates the whole episode of which he was an eye-witness. He had to leave his native village due to

a particular incident which took place in the last week of August 1947. His sister was abducted on the very day of her marriage, and later on she gave a statement in the court that she had embraced Islam and was staying with the so-called abductor at her own will. The family left Hadali and reached Delhi. Ram Rakha relates his days of anguish and how those days were days of extreme difficulty. He explains his affiliation with the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RS.S.) and gives detailed account of the communal violence that was maligning Delhi. Mahatma Gandhi went on fast. But, the people were critical. Those who had suffered criticised Gandhi. Ram Rakha gives a very authentic account of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. He narrates: "A stout, young fellow muscles his way through the crowd, pushes aside a girl who tries to stop him, bends down as if to touch Gandhi's feet, draws a revolver from the folds of his dhoti and before anyone can guess what he is going to do he pumps three bullets into the Old Man, thah, thah, thah.

Gandhi's hands remain joined as if he were bidding namaskar to the world. He says, Ram, Ram. Then he crumples down in a pool of his own blood.

The post-independence India saw another blood-bath narration, instead of the most popular third person in 1984 after the assassination of Smt. Indira Gandhi by a Sikh. Bhagmati comes to the rescue of the author. She informs him about the vandalism and barbarism let loose on Sikh houses, establishments and people. Both save themselves by hiding in the back-garden but Budha Singh is brutally murdered in the Gurudwara. The novel ends with a quite grim and hair-raising incident.

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